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## THE QUESTION OF TRANSLATION IN THE TEACHING OF MODERN LANGUAGES

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The controversy over the reform of modern-language instruction that has been raging in Germany for the last three decades doubtless centers about the question of translation. The importance of translation in the whole movement is so manifest that it may be justly considered the criterion for classifying the various methods. These may be grouped according to their relation to this question as follows:

1. The Grammatical or Translation Method according to which the instruction is carried on exclusively in the native language of the pupil.

2. The Direct Method, which for the most part employs the foreign language in the classroom and dispenses as much as possible with translation.

3. The Method of Compromise, which, though advocating the use of the foreign language as vehicle of instruction, does not reject the translation.

The translation question, as we shall see, cannot be exhaustively treated without entering upon the subject of essay-writing for which the use of the foreign language in class is the prerequisite. So our topic is identical with the discussion of the three methods named above. Let us therefore see in what light these methods appear to us today, after the close scrutiny to which they have been subjected in Germany.<sup>1</sup>

### I. THE CONSERVATIVE, THE CONSTRUCTIVE, THE GRAMMATICAL OR TRANSLATION METHOD

This method is based on that of instruction in the classical languages in which grammar was not made a means of learning, but

<sup>1</sup> Vols. IX and X only of Vietor's *Neuere Sprachen* were at the disposal of the writer of this article.

was treated as an end in itself. This at once relegated the spoken language, if not to the background, at least to a secondary place. The study of grammar was to stimulate and train logical thinking on the part of the pupils. As to the method of procedure: First came the rules; for just as in the language the grammar was of prime importance, so in the grammar the rule was pre-eminent. Nor was the pupil trained to formulate this rule from the language itself; on the contrary, he received it ready-made from the teacher. Such an abstraction presented to the pupil was often incomprehensible and, being thrust upon him, became hateful, or at least remained a matter of indifference to him. With his awakened activity the suffering of the student began. He was obliged to apply this rule to numerous disconnected sentences which in their isolation were often devoid of all human interest. Now grammar, as we all know, is a large collection of such isolated facts, all of equal dreariness to the youthful mind. No wonder he resisted. Recourse to drill became therefore a necessity—drill in memorizing and in never-ending translation. Of what educational value was such a proceeding? The committing of rules had value only as memory drill, not more valuable, for instance, than the memorizing of all the animals or plants of a certain species. To be able to judge of the benefits to be derived from translation let us first see clearly what we are to understand by the term "translation."

Usually one speaks of translation from or into a foreign language. This classification is justifiable. But for our purpose let us rather take the following: (1) actual translation, which for brevity we will call transmission; (2) paraphrasing or reproduction in the foreign tongue.

What can be really translated? The strictly mathematical? But are sentences which express so general a truth as  $3 \times 3 = 9$  in German, English, and French still transmissions? Everyday occurrences? But is not the colloquial language especially full of idioms of all sorts? Or perhaps the purely physical? Here also our answer must be: "Sometimes, perhaps often, but by no means always." Let us take, for instance, that well-known instrument called by Germans *die Schere*, by Frenchmen *les ciseaux*.<sup>1</sup> In German it is

<sup>1</sup> *Kunsterziehung (Deutsche Sprache und Dichtung)* (Leipzig: R. Voigtländer, 1904), p. 255.

that which cuts, the purpose of the thing creating the word; in French the two chisels or blades which act upon each other—the form—has given the instrument its name. This example (a paraphrase) shows that verbal and actual translation are not identical, hence the possibility of verbal translation is not a characteristic of transmission. The difference between transmission and paraphrase lies deeper; it is not of an external or formal nature, but on the contrary, arises from the diverging view-points of different peoples, which naturally are the more diverse the greater the fundamental difference between the nations. This divergence may appear in the individual word as well as in the phrase, in the simple sentence, or in the complex sentence structure. In the last case, transmission may be possible, though more frequently paraphrase is demanded since more is expressed here than in the word or simple sentence, and the divergence of the view-points of the different nations is apt to become more apparent.

To return from this brief excursion into the nature of translation to our Grammatical or Translation Method. Identity in the conception of the thought underlying the phrases in both tongues admits of an actual translation (or transmission). In this way the German pupil conversant with the rules could, for instance, transmit the sentence, "*Tapfere Männer waren die Römer,*" into correct Latin just as he could transmit, "*Der Gesang der Vögel verkündet die Wiederkehr des Frühlings,*" into French, or even the statement, "*Wir wissen, dass die vereinigten Völker Europas Napoleons Macht brachen,*" into English. This kind of translation is logical and pedagogically sound. If it fits into the method in use, it may continue to exist as the expression of the much-praised disciplinary element of the Grammatical Method. There is no doubt, moreover, that the student did learn grammar by this method; only, as has been hinted above, the thing was overdone. Useful mental drill degenerated into mechanical mental gymnastics. And still worse, the student was expected to pursue this method where it became an impossibility. He was also told to transmit where he should have paraphrased. Where it was a question of remodeling the expression, of expressing the thought in a foreign medium picturing the world in a manner unknown to him, the purely constructive proceeding was

bound to fail, however sure the student might be of his grammatical rules. And most translations demand just such recasting of form, of thought, of feeling. We cannot emphasize often enough that such a process demands a considerable control of both languages, and that frequently even the trained philologist fails to accomplish it, unless, indeed, he possess some of the traits of the artist. It is well known that only a poet can translate a poet. But if any teacher believes that grammatical knowledge alone will suffice to translate elevated prose, let him set his most advanced class to translating Washington Irving or any other American classic. He will soon see his error.<sup>1</sup>

Lack of recognition of this truth brought about, not only too intensive an application of the Grammatical Method, but also too long a continuation of the same. Disgust and weariness were the natural consequences. This feeling extended to the entire language, and even to its literature. The student drew a sigh of immense relief when all was over, and hastened to get rid of his books at the first opportunity. Of his own volition, he returned to his classical studies but rarely, at least not until much later in life.

It is with a definite purpose that we employed the past tense in the above description; for we hope that in the application of even the Grammatical Method instructors of today have grown more humane and more reasonable. Assuming now that a wiser application of the method should no longer challenge radical condemnation, but should rather awaken a real interest in the mind of the student and give him a thorough knowledge of grammar, what objections would still remain to this method?

1. Grammar ought not to form the nucleus of instruction.
2. Although a thorough knowledge of language is not possible without an insight into its grammatical structure, on the other hand, a grasp of all the rules of grammar by no means insures command of the language.
3. The purely formal method of instruction is one-sided, and can, therefore, not be the best method for inculcating a knowledge of the language.

<sup>1</sup> It will doubtless be evident that this article was not originally written in English

4. Since the first step of this method (deduction instead of induction) is unpsychological, and the second (constructive translation) often does violence to the spirit of the language, this method lacks a scientific basis.

We further defined the Grammatical Method as one in which instruction is given exclusively in the mother-tongue of the learner. This is inevitable with regard to the classic languages. Moreover, the numerous inflections, the difficulties of construction, the order of words in the sentence, the great divergence of expression, demand translation into the mother-tongue; except perhaps in the most advanced classes. In dealing with modern languages the matter is very different. Whether it is here advisable to retain the translation into the learner's language, or to make the new language a means of instruction, we will examine in another section.

## II. THE DIRECT, THE REFORM (OR THE NATURAL) METHOD

This German Natural Method is not to be confounded with the so-called Natural Method of America. The latter, by no means without merit for the development of language instruction in this country, arose out of legitimate reaction against the one-sided classical method, and, going to the other extreme, became as one-sided as that against which it rebelled. In it little or no grammar is taught, and, in place of logical training, merely external devices are substituted—cultivation of the ear and of memory. Mainly because of this error, the whole structure breaks completely down at the end of the first year. The Reform Method of Germany does not exclude grammar; yet it does not, like the Old Method, proceed deductively; it does not precipitate difficulties upon the unprepared student; nor does it make grammar the idol to which all else must bow down. It runs parallel with the American Natural Method as far as this proves itself wise: knowing that with the child imitation precedes reasoning, this method, in the early stages of instruction, advocates unconscious absorption of the foreign forms. For this purpose the use of the new tongue in the classroom is the best means, while grammar is taken up cautiously and by degrees. All grammatical phenomena that can be observed in examples and impressed by imitation are best left without theoretic abstraction. For, in this

method, grammar, as a theory of word-formation and sentence structure, has as little excuse for being as has pronunciation as a theory of sound-production. When theoretical grammar is introduced, it is only in case of important and frequently recurring forms. Method of procedure may vary according to the age of the pupil, but it would hardly be possible to do away with the rules altogether. When the rules are taken up, they are always to be derived inductively from the text, thus becoming of interest to the student as a discovery of his own, as well as serving to develop the logical faculties. Practice, however, is necessary to put him in actual possession of the rule. The manner in which this practice enters in will be discussed later. If the teacher can carry it on in the language taught, three desirable ends are attained with one effort: the rule is fixed, the vocabulary is enriched, and the feeling for the language is deepened. The rule itself may be formulated in the foreign tongue, and be thus committed to memory, though objections might be raised to this as being too closely allied to the Old Method.

Thus this method by holding fast to grammar avoids the danger into which the American Natural Method fell—of making impossible demands upon the memory. From the Old Method it differs mainly in that grammar becomes only a means to an end, not an end in itself.

In the New Method reading fills the place that grammar formerly occupied. This reading, the center of gravity of the new instruction, consists of selections from texts chosen to give the student insight into the peculiarities of the foreign sentiment and expression as differing from those of his own compatriots. Thus the ideal of instruction has changed. In place of the thorough grasp of the grammar which formed the *summum bonum* of the old régime, the new evangel preaches a concept of the foreign land and people, a knowledge of their life and customs, of their social and industrial problems, and also of their spiritual aspirations. We cannot go into the details of the manner of carrying out this method in Germany by means of maps, illustrations for culture-history, facsimiles, and other "object-lesson" materials. We need only emphasize that these results can be obtained only if the student is taught to understand the foreign idiom perfectly; that is, if he can read, write, and, if possible, speak it readily. The final goal may to some seem too far removed for

actual realization, but all must agree that this threefold familiarity with the language is essential.

If for a moment we waive the question of speaking the language, and if we grant that the Old Method succeeded admirably in inculcating an intelligent reading of texts, the question of writing the foreign language still remains. The only method available to the old school is evidently to start from the translation. In the first part of this article we reduced the legitimate claim of translation to transmission, which leaves only a very small remnant of the formerly broad field of translation. But even granting that our premise be false, it still remains irrefutable that every kind of translation leads necessarily away from the foreign idiom and back to the starting-point—the mother-tongue. Experience fully proves this theory. It is possible to study vocabularies for years, to translate volumes, to understand the grammar perfectly, without attaining the ability to handle the foreign tongue freely. Whosoever doubts this may be asked to explain, for instance, why in the German *Gymnasium*, in which Latin is drilled from the *Sexta* up, the Latin essay in the *Prima* was so complete a failure that it had finally to be discontinued. A pupil trained wholly by translation cannot free himself from it. The more thoroughly he has been drilled, the more it has become part and parcel of himself. He always conceives the thought in his mother-tongue and translates it either mentally or on paper. For there is no bridge leading from translation to free, natural expression. The American Natural Method recognized this fact and early introduced the free written expression as a continuation of the free oral one. The fault of this method has been mentioned above—the total neglect of grammar. It must further be criticised in that its procedure was not sufficiently slow or methodical. The result was often exercises bristling with mistakes, which drove the conscientious teacher back into the clutches of the Grammatical Method.

The Reform Method starts with the tenet that speaking and writing a foreign language are essentially the same thing. Both are attainable only by temporarily leaving the ground of one's own language and entering into the spirit of the foreign tongue. Speaking and writing arise from the same source and are by their nature inseparable. Hence fluency of speech, that is not grounded on prac-



tice in writing, is not thorough, neither can facility in writing be secured without practice in speaking. Language being primarily a spoken medium, oral practice should precede the written; that is, in the detail of instruction, not in the general plan. Speaking and writing being one, the two must be discussed together. Before proceeding, we will once more emphasize the fact that the ability to speak is to be considered only as a means to an end—i. e., to the penetration of the intellectual content of the language—and not an end in itself. If, therefore, readiness of speech in the foreign tongue cannot be attained in the classroom, this is no argument against the use of the foreign language during instruction.

We mentioned above that this method tends to accustom the pupil early to the use of the other language. The best beginning is by means of object-lessons, using picture-books and cards. The teacher pronounces and explains for the class; the pupils imitate him. Then follow questions on the part of the instructor, answered (also in the foreign tongue) by the student. Soon the pupil will be able to put questions which are to be answered, at first by the instructor, later by other pupils. Next easy, connected texts may be used which are modifications of what has been learned orally, thus avoiding translation. The teacher should read each passage, repeatedly and with great distinctness, insisting upon the pupil's imitation with correct pronunciation and emphasis. The practicing of difficult foreign sounds, while necessary, should not be carried to excess; it should preferably be done when the pupil may himself see its necessity. The reading-lesson should be discussed between teacher and pupil as was the object-lesson. A word of explanation in the pupil's own mother-tongue, when it seems necessary, is not to be prohibited, as a clear understanding is never to be sacrificed to method. Such an occasional word at any period of the instruction may save much time. In other words, the teacher should remain the master, and not become the slave, of his method. So long as he does not allow the language used to deteriorate into an irritating mixture of the two tongues, and keeps the center of gravity always in the new language, the mother-tongue will gradually and imperceptibly disappear with the advance of the pupil.

Although this method strives from the very start to avoid transla-

tion, the fact nevertheless remains that the student at first associates each foreign word with its familiar equivalent, and not directly with the object which it represents; even at the sight of the picture the familiar word will arise, and not the newly acquired one. But skilful instruction, some self-control, and a gradually acquired habit will soon enable the student to skip the first mental process, just as one living abroad soon speaks without translating. Above all, in the beginning the spoken exercises must not be too difficult. As long as the student's entire attention is centered upon the form, the thought must be simple and clear. But if his ear be at all trained, and if he be encouraged by his teacher, he will soon be able to advance even to abstract ideas. Mental arithmetic, for instance, can be introduced very early with excellent effect.

Hand in hand with each oral lesson should go a "short" written exercise. This should be identical in substance with the oral one, so that the student will write or speak with equal ease. Nothing would be more illogical than, after half a year of purely oral work, to confront him suddenly with a lengthy written task; he must himself realize that speaking and writing are one. As it is not our purpose to follow the pupil through every step of his development, we will merely note that he is not to escape grammar completely. Grammar is essential for elucidation and fixing of that which he has already learned conversationally. Nor need his grammatical knowledge be inferior to that attained by the students instructed according to the old Grammar Method. The well-known fact that a student can rattle off a rule which he does not know how to apply correctly will undoubtedly be less frequent under the new régime.

We have herewith, we hope, outlined the plan of the Direct Method, and, for the sake of clearness, touched upon a few details of execution. In closing we shall mention the most important devices which those who favor this method recommend:

1. To aid acquisition (the training of the eye at the expense of the ear, so prevalent in modern education, is here the greatest difficulty to be overcome): loud, distinct, and careful enunciation and perfect pronunciation in speaking and reading on the part of the teacher as well as of the student; correct emphasis; correct use of the organs of speech; home practice in oral reading; concert work in class; the

reading aloud of interesting stories by the teacher or an advanced student (an excellent exercise to further quick grasp of the spoken word), dictations, memorizing of short poems and prose selections, conundrums, charades, rebuses, and similar material, singing of foreign songs in the singing class, playing of national games; stereopticon lectures on the foreign land; recitations and addresses by natives; school dramatics.

2. To assist reproduction (spoken and written): picture charts and other objects; readers containing the vocabulary of daily life; oral and written exercises in questions and answers; copying in the foreign language; alteration of matter read (e. g., with change of person or tense); oral or written reproduction of what has been heard, seen, or read; brief extracts of tales read or heard; giving prose versions of poems; independent description of an object or picture at hand; retroversion; reading-matter taken from modern literature; reading at sight; free description of events of student's own experience; letter-writing; international correspondence of pupils; free invention in the foreign tongue; essays; dramatic dialogues; discussions; school editions with annotations in the foreign tongue; monolingual dictionaries (giving the foreign definitions or synonyms instead of translations).

This list is somewhat heterogeneous, mainly because this method has not yet been carefully worked out in every detail. One thing is, however, evident: the reformers demand considerable material for instruction. Whoever in this country has not such material at hand must largely manufacture it himself, for in America so far very little provision has been made for this sort of work. He must consider carefully what he is undertaking before he tries to apply this New Method.

### III. THE COMPROMISE METHOD

This we can treat more briefly. In common with the Reform Method, this method holds that a person practiced in speaking and writing a language has a much more fluent and intimate understanding of the printed page than he who associates no living sound with the written symbol. Nor does it dare reject the claim for a practical mastery of the language, since this—whether on ideal or practical

grounds—seems to be the demand of our present age. But since such an attempt is in danger of furthering a merely superficial training, an intellectual chattering instead of a really cultural influence, it fears lest the new method should underestimate the value of grammar and overestimate that of ready speech, as the old one erred in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, this Compromise Method favors the use of the foreign language in the classroom.

In human society there will always be people who prefer the golden mean, especially when—as in this case—the end to be attained is so complex. We saw that this end really means nothing less than the introduction of a young student into the culture ideals of a foreign land, as these are represented in its language and literature. Moreover, as we still await the clarified and accepted statements of views as to the best method of attaining this end, it is not surprising that the official curricula of the secondary schools of Prussia still cling to the Compromise Method.<sup>1</sup> But here, as always, compromise shows its inherent lack of vitality by being without initiative force; it, furthermore, incurs the danger that, in the effort to unite discordant aims, nothing rounded and perfect will be accomplished. It falls between two stools. This danger seems especially imminent when we reach the subject of translation.

In our observations the question of translation into the student's native tongue has thus far not been considered. Let us now take up the discussion from this point of view.

Everyone will admit that a student cannot translate a foreign text until he has understood it; otherwise he translates incorrectly. Then the question may be raised: What is the object of translation? Why is not mere understanding sufficient? A twofold answer is given. It is claimed that the student perfects his knowledge of his native tongue by translating into it. This may be partially true, but one thing is sure: he ruins his own style through the usual wholesale translation. At this period of his development his salvation lies in the careful keeping apart of the two tongues, so that his own stylistic individuality, which is still in a formative stage, be not contaminated. How many classroom translations from Cæsar are well

<sup>1</sup> *Lehrpläne und Lehraufgaben für die höheren Schulen in Preussen* (Halle a. S.: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1901). See, e. g., pp. 41 ff.

rendered into English, or into any other civilized language? Is the foreign resident, who always has the two modes of expression at hand, distinguished for purity of style in either one? Has not often even learned translation worked havoc at home? Let him who would realize what a good translation costs look up what such a master of language as Luther thought of translating. He will be surprised to find how desperately he had to wrestle for adequacy of expression in spite of all the painful hours spent in preparation for his task.

Secondly, it is asserted that translation is necessary to a judgment of the student's accuracy of understanding. There are two things that present difficulties in translating—the form and the content. In a method which eliminates translation it is more than ever necessary that the texts presented be adapted to the capacity of the student. A motto of especial value to American teachers would be, "Better too easy than too difficult," at least as long as the student is still struggling with the form. Moreover, the modern languages are much more simple in inflection than the classics, and the ideal Reform Method presupposes graded readers. Simple and carefully graded reading-material will reduce the number of uncomprehended passages, and such as still remain will be easily discovered by the instructor teaching in the foreign tongue. The pupil's manner of reading the passage aloud, his assurance, his intonation, etc., display his grasp of the meaning. In doubtful cases the teacher can easily discover, by means of questions in the foreign tongue, whether or not a special passage is understood. In extreme cases the mother-tongue may finally be resorted to. Even the most radical Reform Method would be guilty of no inconsistency in this, for teaching is an art, and as such should at necessity be free to soar above methods and theories.

For reasons developed above, we are still less favorably impressed with a method which clings to the translation "into" the foreign idiom. We saw that such translation is antagonistic to free natural expression in the foreign idiom; the two cannot be yoked together. In the secondary schools of Prussia either translation or essay-writing may be demanded of the graduate according to the decision of the *Provinzialschul-Kollegium*.<sup>1</sup> Hence, at the tenth *Neuphilologentag*

<sup>1</sup> *Ordnung der Reifeprüfung an den neunstufigen höheren Schulen in Preussen* (Halle a. S.: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1902), p. 6.

at Breslau<sup>2</sup> attention was called to the fact that an insistence upon translation would annul all concessions made to the Reform Method. Doubtless the above regulation will be properly modified, for even if logical, it would be practically impossible. The New Method of modern-language instruction makes such great demands upon the teachers in any case that the premature aging of the latter has been advanced as an argument against the method. The foolish double demand would wear out even the strongest physically and mentally. In accordance with this fact, the German entrance examinations of the University of Chicago demand no translation of the student whose training has been according to the New Method, and no essay of one who has been trained according to the Old. In its own practice, the German Department stands for the independent use of the new language, hence opposed to translation. In France translation into the foreign tongue has been done away with completely.

The Compromise Method, it is true, obtains the rule by induction, but sees in translation the best means of putting these rules into practice. We believe that translation is mainly paraphrasing into the new tongue, and, as such, demands too intimate a knowledge of the latter to be used successfully the first years. Only a method which puts at the disposal of the student what is temporarily necessary of such knowledge can be looked upon with favor: This is true of "retroversion," and by this means we desire to drill our pupils in the grammatical rules. For the American student this means changing an English text into German, which in its place is an altered version of a German text with which he has first acquainted himself thoroughly. Both, the German original as well as the English version, lie before the student. The English text differs from the German sufficiently to exclude mere copying. The German text complements the student's insufficient knowledge of the foreign idiom, and enables him to produce a paraphrase. Moreover, by this method he is not driven back to his mother-tongue as a model, and the *circulus vitiosus* of paraphrasing, as it used to be done in the lower classes, is broken. So retroversion is not opposed to free expression. Since it contains both elements, the latter as well as translation, it is a compromise of

<sup>2</sup> *Die Neueren Sprachen*, Vol. X, pp. 225 ff.

the Old and of the Reform Method, and therefore has been discussed by us at this point. According to our view, it is the only good feature in the Compromise Method.

We have, then, felt compelled to decide against translation and in favor of the Reform Method, but have not failed to call attention to the fact that much remains to be done before the New Method can be consistently carried out. Therefore, whether willing or not, we may still often be forced to compromise. May the transition period, however, be brief, and may we not lose sight of our ideal, so that the fundamental truths of the reform may speedily and permanently be realized.